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AUTHOR Ede, Lisa
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ABSTRACT

The Rogerian argument, as described by Young, Baker, and Pike in "Rhetoric: Discovery and Change," misrepresents Carl Rogers's own principles. Addressing the need for improved interpersonal communication both within and outside of therapy, Rogers describes three conditions for "listening with understanding": congruence, or nondirective listening; unconditional acceptance of all ideas expressed; and emphatic understanding of the speaker's emotions and experiences. Influenced by Anatol Rapoport, Young, Baker, and Pike have translated these strategies into steps in an argument. After demonstrating an understanding of the opponent's position and stating contexts in which it may be valid, the writer gives his or her own views and describes how adopting them would benefit the opponent. As the use of the words "opponent" and "argument" suggests, this strategy--far from being nondirective or genuinely accepting--aims at winning the reader over to a definite position. The writer's inability to incorporate empathic understanding into a written argument indicates the antithetical natures of Rogers's nonevaluative language and the rhetorical stance. With its attempt to manipulate rather than to directly confront the reader, Rogerian rhetoric represents an unnecessary and potentially harmful pedagogical strategy. (MM)

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ED230944

Lisa Ede
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97330

Is Rogerian Rhetoric Really Rogerian?

In preparing for my talk today, I found myself with an unexpected problem: I had much more to discuss than I could possibly cover in twenty minutes. This was an unexpected problem because when I began my critique of Rogerian rhetoric I really did not anticipate that it would lead me as far as it did--would be as complex a subject or as richly revealing as I now find it to be. Such a discovery is exciting, for I am now involved in a project which deeply interests me and which I believe holds important implications for our profession. But it also represents a problem. How should I organize and limit my discussion today?

One obvious solution would be to focus on a single aspect of my argument and hope to convince you, by means of a detailed analysis, of the reasonableness of my interpretation. I do hope, in fact, to attempt such an explanation. But because I believe that much more is at stake than simply proving or disproving the validity and usefulness of Rogerian rhetoric, I would like to begin by outlining the essential lines of what I expect to be a relatively complex study. In so doing, I must necessarily appear polemical since I will be unable to develop or support my ideas at length. I really don't mind that since I think that conference papers ideally ought to stimulate questions and controversy. I do hope, however, that this brief description of my overall argument, of which today's presentation is just a part, will help clarify and enrich the more specific discussion which follows.

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I might best express my current thinking on Rogerian rhetoric--the approach defined by Young, Becker, and Pike and advocated by Hairston, Bator, and others--by presenting a series of four hypotheses:

1. Advocates of Rogerian rhetoric base their arguments concerning the need for an alternative to Aristotelian rhetoric upon a stereotyped view of classical rhetoric. Their arguments also conflict with important research in speech communication and classics.

2. Rogerian rhetoric represents a distortion of Carl Rogers' own principles. Rogerian rhetoric is not Rogerian. (It is this point which I intend to argue more fully in a few moments.)

3. Although it has many strengths, Carl Rogers' theory does not constitute an appropriate foundation in which to ground contemporary rhetorical theory. Rogers' ontological and epistemological assumptions imply an arhetorical view of language, one in which language functions ideally as a transparent means of self-expression.

4. Rogerian rhetoric represents an unnecessary, and potentially harmful, pedagogical strategy. We already have other, more general and flexible, techniques--such as that of teaching students to analyze rhetorical situations--which can help students learn to write ethical and effective arguments which neither threaten nor manipulate the reader.

These, then, are my hypotheses concerning Rogerian rhetoric. They aren't all I hope eventually to say about Rogerian rhetoric, however, for what also interests me is the process whereby something that was, in effect, a fairly local pedagogical strategy--Young, Becker, and Pike's entire discussion of Rogerian argument in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, including their reprinting of Rogers' 1951 article on communication and a number of exercises, covers only 17 out of a total of 370 pages--became transformed into a major "Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric."[1]

The resulting analysis will, I hope, reveal a number of dangers which all of us in composition studies face. These dangers include such things as:

> --our tendency to appropriate research findings in other fields without fully examing their underlying theoretical assumptions
>
> --pressures placed on us by the freshman composition textbook industry to create immediate pedagogical applications for newly developed theoretical and research discoveries
>
> --our failure adequately to become familiar with historical and theoretical research in speech communication, classics, and philosophy which could--and should--inform our own discipline.

Finally, as part of my larger analysis, I hope eventually to explore the possibility that Rogerian rhetoric is but another manifestation of English teachers' (and most of us in composition studies still fit into the category of English teachers) long-standing discomfort with persuasion. Until recently, we dealt with this discomfort by focusing in our writing classes on something we called argument--which, we insisted, was quite different from persuasion. Recognizing that current theories of understanding make such a distinction untenable, we may find in Rogerian argument--with its emphasis on objective, unevaluative language--an attractive alternative.

As you can see, I find much of interest in the current dispute over Rogerian rhetoric--a dispute which even I once considered little more than "a tempest in a teapot." In the rest of my time today, however, I would like to focus on the second of my four hypotheses: that Rogerian rhetoric represents a distortion of Carl Rogers' own principles. As a point of reference for my discussion, I will focus on the original formulation of Rogerian rhetoric,

that developed by Young, Becker, and Pike in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, since it is both the clearest and certainly the most influential presentation of this approach.

A major source for these authors seems to have been Rogers' 1951 paper on "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation."[2] Here Rogers, speaking to a group of educators in speech communication about the potential implications of his work for their field, cites the "tendency to react to any emotionally meaningful statement by forming an evaluation of it from our own point of view . . . [as] the major barrier to interpersonal communication" and presents as a solution to this problem what he calls "listening with understanding," which he explains "means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him . . ."[3] Noting that this method had already proven useful with a variety of "small face-to-face groups," Rogers challenges his listeners to consider the potential benefits of this strategy if applied on a larger scale: "This then appears to be a test-tube solution to the breakdown of communication as it occurs in small groups. Can we take this small scale answer, investigate it further, refine it, develop it and apply it to the tragic and well-nigh fatal failures of communication which threaten the very existence of the modern world? It seems to me that this is a possibility and a challenge which we should explore."[4]

Young, Becker, and Pike were not the first to respond to this challenge. In fact, they rely heavily in their discussion of Rogerian rhetoric on the work of Anatol Rapoport, who in Fights, Games, and Debates, which they also quote in their text, attempts to apply Rogers' theories.[5] It is Rapoport,

for instance, who establishes the "three methods of modifying images," the Pavlovian, Freudian, and Rogerian, which appear early in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change as "Rhetorical strategies and images of man."[6] Rapoport also first articulates what in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change become the tasks required of a writer who wishes to apply the Rogerian strategy: "1) to convey to the reader that he is understood, (2) to delineate the area within which he believes the reader's position to be valid, and (3) to induce him to believe that he and the writer share similar moral qualities. . .and aspirations. . ."[7] Later in their discussion, Young, Becker, and Pike refine these "tasks" into what they call possible "phases to [an] argument":

> 1) An introduction to the position and a demonstration that the opponent's position is understood.
>
> 2) A statement of the contexts in which the opponent's statement may be valid.
>
> 3) A statement of the writer's position, including the contexts in which it is valid.
>
> 4) A statement of how the opponent's position would benefit if he were to adopt elements of the writer's position. If the writer can show that the positions complement each other, that each supplies what the other lacks, so much the better (p. 283).

Although Young, Becker, and Pike comment that "Rogerian argument has no conventional structure," the possible "phases to [an] argument," presented above, look suspiciously like one (p. 275 and p. 283). And, indeed, later writers, such as Hairston, essentially follow Young, Becker, and Pike's scheme.[8] Such formulization is troubling, for it is antithetical both to the intent and to the spirit of Rogers' ideas. Nor is it a new problem for Rogers. In his evaluation of the impact of Rogers' theories, for instance,

Richard Evans notes that "Rogers' work has been corrupted over the years by practitioners who have discovered the technique but not the philosophy."[9]

Does Rogerian rhetoric represent such a corruption? Perhaps the best way to approach this question is to identify the basic principles informing all of Rogers' work--for such principles do exist--and then to see if Rogerian rhetoric is congruent with them. Speaking to the American Psychological Association in 1973, the year he received its Distinguished Professional Contribution Award, Rogers described the central assumption underlying all of his work. It is, simply, ". . .that the individual has within himself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his self-concept, his attitudes, his self-directed behavior--and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided."[10]

Rogers had defined and implemented these attitudes or conditions as early as 1951, when he published Client-Centered Therapy,[11] and they have not substantially changed since that time.[12] In an interview with Richard Evans, Rogers defined these conditions as follows:

> First, and most important, is therapist congruence or genuineness--his ability to be a real person with the client. Second is the therapist's ability to accept the client as a separate person without judging him or evaluating him. It is rather an unconditional acceptance--that I'm able to accept you as you are. The third condition is a real empathic understanding. . . If it is simply reflection, that's no good. That's just a technique. It must be a desire to understand empathically, to really stand in the client's shoes and to see the world from his vantage point.[13]

Since Rogers' statement is necessarily general, I would like to examine each condition individually, commenting on the ways it seems to be carried out in Rogerian rhetoric.

Rogers' first condition, congruence, might seem rather obvious. Wouldn't any therapist, or anyone engaged in ethical communication, strive to be genuine and honest? Rogers' intent here, however, is much more precise--and demanding. As the following quotation by Rogers indicates, congruence requires one to abandon all efforts at interpretation, evaluation, or guidance:

> The therapist must lay aside his preoccupation with diagnosis and his diagnostic shrewdness, must discard his tendency to make professional evaluations, must cease his endeavors to form an accurate prognosis, must give up the temptation subtly to guide the individual, and must concentrate on one purpose only; that of providing deep understanding and acceptance of the attitudes consciously held at this moment by the client as he explores step by step into the dangerous areas which he has been denying to consciousness.
>
> I trust it is evident from this description that this type of relationship can exist only if the counselor is deeply and genuinely able to adopt these attitudes. Client-centered counseling, if it is to be effective, cannot be a trick or a tool. It is not a subtle way of guiding the client while pretending to let him guide himself. To be effective, it must be genuine.[14]

Such a statement--and this is just one of many instances in which Rogers insists upon the non-directive nature of his enterprise--seems to question the very possibility of something called Rogerian argument, particularly in writing, where the potential for genuine dialogue (of the sort Rogers emphasizes) is, if not eliminated, then certainly reduced.[15] One's concern about the potential for manipulation inherent in Rogerian argument--the fear that it may be nothing but a subtle way of guiding the reader while pretending to let him guide himself (to paraphrase Rogers)--is only increased when one notes that throughout their discussion Young, Becker, and Pike consistently call the reader "the opponent" and make statements such as the following: "The writer's first task, then, is to state the reader's position so carefully that the reader will agree that it has been well-stated. If the writer "wins" this part of the argument, the reader is likely to continue listening"(p. 276).[16]

Rogers' second condition, the necessity of establishing unconditional acceptance or positive regard, also assumes a non-directive approach. Rogers argues, for instance, that "only as the therapist is completely willing that any outcome, any direction, may be chosen--only then does he realize the vital strength of the capacity of the individual for constructive action."[17] Such acceptance seems to have little in common with Rogerian argument, which is clearly directed toward a goal, one established by the writer. Young, Becker, and Pike do note that this goal may change as a result of the writer's involvement with Rogerian argument, but the emphasis remains on assent to the writer's purposes. Young, Becker, and Pike's own summary of Rogerian argument, for instance, concludes that: "Essentially, [in Rogerian argument] the writer induces his opponent to listen to his position, to understand it, and to see the truth in it, by demonstrating that he has done the same with the opponent's position"(p. 283).[18] Such demonstration, which occurs in steps one and two of Young, Becker, and Pike's "phases" for Rogerian argument, seem quite different from Rogers' own sense of congruence and unconditional positive regard.

Rogers' third condition is that of "real empathic understanding." As Rogers describes it, empathic understanding involves complete immersion in the emotions and experiences of the person with whom one is communicating. Rogers notes that "In client-centered therapy the client finds the counselor a genuine alter ego in the operational and technical sense--a self which has temporarily divested itself (as far as possible) of its own self-hood, except for the one quality of endeavoring to understand."[19] Advocates of Rogerian

rhetoric have recognized the difficulty of translating this experience into written discourse. Young, Becker, and Pike comment, for instance, that: "Written argument excludes the possibility of continual readjustment of the discourse as the result of observing the opponent's reactions. Your opponent cannot show you where you have failed to state his position adequately and give you an opportunity to modify your statement before continuing the discussion. In written argument, then, especially great care must be taken to state his position well the first time"(p. 282). Young, Becker, and Pike urge students to practice empathy in formulating their statement of the writer's position--the first step in their four "phases" of Rogerian argument. They define empathy, however, as "considering the beliefs and perspectives of the reader in the context of his attitudes, values, and past experiences" (p. 275)--a task which seems little different from traditional audience analysis and bears only slight connection to Rogers' own understanding of the term.

Rogerian rhetoric is, of course, an application of Carl Rogers' theories, not an attempt to recreate the therapeutic experience itself. Still, given the contradictions discussed above, it seems reasonable to question, at least, whether Rogerian rhetoric, as defined by Young, Becker, and Pike and advocated by other critics, really merits the adjective "Rogerian." In all of his writings--and in his own applications of his theory in encounter groups, participative management, and student-centered teaching--Carl Rogers has for over thirty years insisted that one guided by his principles must internalize and manifest the three conditions I have discussed today: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding. As we have seen,

these conditions must be genuinely and deeply internalized or they become mere techniques, and they must be experienced in a non-directive atmosphere.

It may not be impossible to apply Rogers' principles in written argument, but it certainly represents a difficult task, one which I believe has yet to be successfully completed. Written communication, with its inevitable separation of writer and reader, seems to make genuine empathic understanding difficult, while the carefully controlled structure required by written discourse, but especially by argument, works against the development of congruence and unconditional positive regard. Finally, in attempting to determine the validity of Rogerian rhetoric--whether Rogerian rhetoric really is Rogerian (and, as I have noted, this is but one of many interesting and important questions which one can ask about Rogerian rhetoric)--we might consider the comments of Carl Rogers himself, who as early as 1956 began to be concerned by some of the uses to which his ideas were being put. The following is from a speech Rogers made that year to the senior class at Brandeis University on the development of his personal thinking and personal philosophy; Rogers had just commented on the intense criticism which his work has always engendered: "And perhaps [these] storms of criticism are more than matched by the damage done by uncritical and unquestioning 'disciples'--individuals who have acquired something of a new point of view for themselves and have gone forth to do battle with all and sundry, using as weapons both inaccurate and accurate understandings of me and my work. I have found it difficult to know, at times, whether I have been hurt more by my 'friends' or my enemies."[20]

Notes

[1] Maxine Hairston, "Carl Rogers's Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric," CCC, 27 (December 1976), 373-377.

[2] Carl R. Rogers, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation" in Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), pp. 284-289. This paper was originally presented on October 11, 1951 at Northwestern University's Centennial Conference on Communication. It is reprinted in Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming A Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp. 329-337.

[3] Rogers, "Communication," in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, p. 285.

[4] Rogers, "Communication," in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, p. 287 and p. 289. Rogers' own example of a potential application is to send a "therapeutically oriented international group. . .to the Russian leaders" to attempt to build better understanding among nations(p. 288).

[5] Anatol Rapoport, Fights, Games, and Debates (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961). See pages 245-300.

[6] Rapoport, p. 273; Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), pp. 6-7. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

[7] Young, Becker, and Pike, p. 275; Rapoport, pp. 286-287.

[8] Hairston in "Carl Rogers's Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric" presents five steps, not four. In a move which brings Rogerian rhetoric even closer to traditional argument, her fifth step asks students to "Outline the solution you propose, pointing out what both sides may gain from it"(p. 376).

[9] Richard L. Evans, Carl Rogers: The Man and His Ideas (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), p. xli.

[10] Carl R. Rogers, "In Retrospect: Forty-Six Years" in Richard L. Evans, Carl Rogers: The Man and His Ideas, p. 124.

[11] Carl R. Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).

[12] Rogers did somewhat enlarge the role of the therapist. Early in his work, Rogers urged the therapist to avoid indicating his or her own feelings or responses to the client and focus completely on empathizing with the client. Later Rogers realized that in order for real congruence to occur, the therapist needed to have a greater degree of freedom. Despite this minor change, however, Rogers' fundamental conception of the therapist-client relationship has not changed.

[13] Evans, p. 29.

[14] Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy, p.30; my emphasis.

[15] Diane C. Mader makes a similar point in "What Are They Doing to Carl Rogers?," ETC, 37 (Winter, 1980), pp. 314-320. Our arguments differ in other important respects, however.

[16] I would like to express my gratitude to Amanda King, who first made me aware of the implications of Young, Becker, and Pike's use of words such as these.

[17] Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy, p. 48.

[18] Young, Becker, and Pike do speak more generally of the goal of Rogerian rhetoric as being "to create a situation conducive to cooperation" (282), but their more specific advice and the structure of the "phases" of Rogerian argument assume that the writer always has a clear purpose or goal which he or she wishes to achieve.

[19] Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy, p. 49

[20] Rogers, On Becoming A Person, p. 15.